

Administration of Barack H. Obama, 2009

Remarks at the Congressional Hispanic Caucus Institute Annual Award Gala
September 16, 2009

Thank you so much. What an extraordinary honor to be here tonight. Thank you. Thank you very much. Thank you so much. Let me begin by thanking all of you for supporting this wonderful organization. I want to say how much I appreciate my former colleague and great friend Senator Bob Menendez and all the members of the Hispanic Caucus for their outstanding work.

I want to thank the chairwoman of the Congressional Hispanic Caucus, Nydia Velazquez, for her extraordinary dedication and leadership. Our great Speaker, who has been a partner in every single tough fight that we have had so far, and none of them have been easy, but she is helping to move this country forward, Nancy Pelosi. To all the House leadership, I'm grateful to you; to a couple of people who I stole from the Congressional Hispanic Caucus—they were just too good to leave alone—my great Secretary of Labor, Hilda Solis, and my outstanding Secretary of the Interior, Ken Salazar.

I want to acknowledge the presence of Her Royal Highness Infanta Cristina of Spain, who is here. And our own royalty, somebody who we have become so extraordinarily proud of, somebody who I've just come to adore and who is going to make us proud for many, many years to come because she is not term limited, the newest Justice of the Supreme Court, Sonia Sotomayor. *[Applause]* Thank you.

Well, Michelle and I are so pleased to be here among such good friends. I want to congratulate Marc Anthony, not only because it's his birthday, but also because he's being honored tonight as an artist who has shared not only his music but his heritage with all of us. And I'm sure it has nothing to do with the fact that Nydia has a crush on you—*[laughter]*—that you were provided this award. She's not alone—I'm telling you, J. Lo., watch out. *[Laughter]*

I'm also pleased to have the opportunity to be here as you mark the start of Hispanic Heritage Month. I want you to know that my administration is marking this occasion as well. Later this week, Secretary Salazar will lead the first meeting of a commission to look at the creation of a national museum to honor the historic contributions of Latinos and Latinas in our country.

Everybody here understands how important those contributions have been and will be. For more than 30 years, the Congressional Hispanic Caucus Institute has, through scholarships and fellowships and internships, sought to lift up the next generation of Latino leaders. I came here 1 year ago as a candidate and said this was a goal I shared. And today I am here as a President to say that this is a goal my administration is helping to meet.

Now, you don't have to take my word for it. You can ask Ken or Hilda or any of the many young Latinos and Latinas, including four from CHCI Fellows, who work tirelessly in the White House and throughout my administration every single day. I mean, I don't mean to brag, but the number of Latinos and Latinas I've nominated to senior positions at this point exceeds that of any administration in history, and we are not finished yet. Nearly half of those appointments, by the way, are Latinas. And every wasn't—every single one of them wasn't just the best Latino for the job, but the best person for the job.

And obviously, one of my proudest moments as President—in fact, probably the proudest moment as President that I've had—was the day that Justice Sotomayor formally ascended to our Nation's highest court. We stood where generations of Justices had served, in that ornate chamber, and as she lifted her right hand to take the oath, our Nation took one step closer to fully

realizing the founding ideals that the Court itself was established to defend. And across America, millions of children's sights are now set higher. Their dreams are a little bigger. That benefits all of us.

Now, we face enormous challenges as a nation. And many of those challenges are felt far more acutely by Latinos. But our ability to solve any of the problems we face, from health care to education, from economic recovery to immigration reform, depends on our willingness to recognize that our destiny is shared. We've seen this starkly throughout this economic crisis, as fortunes linked small-business owners on Main Street to the bond trader on Wall Street, the young family looking to refinance a mortgage to the large bank whose profits depend on their staying out of foreclosure. But this has always been true, in good times and bad. Our success has long depended on our willingness to see our challenges as ones we have to face together, our willingness to live up to a simple ideal: *Todos somos Americanos*—we are all Americans.

Because when there's a young Latina stuck in a crumbling school who starts to actually believe she's worth less because she doesn't have more, that isn't just a problem for that child. That isn't just a problem for the Hispanic community. That's a problem for our Nation. That's why I've challenged States to raise the bar across their early education programs, so that more of our children enter kindergarten ready to learn. That's why I've called for a new race to the top to reform America's schools and provide students with the knowledge and the skills they need for the 21st century. That's why we will address the dropout crisis that plagues far too many communities and commit to increasing access to college and success at college, so that America can once again have the highest proportion of college graduates in the world. That depends in part on making sure that Latinos and Latinas have access to higher education, and that's a commitment of our administration.

We'll provide a complete and competitive education for every student, because our prosperity as a nation requires that we harness the talents of all our people, not just some. *Todos somos Americanos*.

When the unemployment rate for Latinos and Latinas is higher than 10 percent, it isn't just a problem for families worried about paying the bills or keeping their home. This is not just a problem for the Hispanic community. It's a problem for our Nation. And that's why the Recovery Act is providing a tax cut for working families and extended unemployment and health insurance for folks who have lost their jobs. That's why we are not only seeking to revive this economy but to rebuild it stronger than before, by investing in clean energy jobs of tomorrow, by preparing our children to outcompete workers around the world, and by giving every American the security and stability of quality, affordable health insurance. *Todos somos Americanos*.

You know how important it is to pass health insurance reform. You know that Hispanics are more likely to be uninsured and Hispanic small-business owners, like all small-business owners, are struggling with higher health care costs than large companies, costs that are rising all the time. So I'm grateful to so many of you for the support that you've shown from the beginning of this effort. But the problems in our health care system aren't just a Hispanic American problem; they're an American problem.

That's why we'll offer tax credits to individuals to help them afford coverage and to small-business owners to help them provide coverage for their workers. That's why we'll provide greater security and stability to those who already have insurance. Because no one in America should have to worry that their coverage will be dropped the moment they need it the most. No one in America should be denied health insurance because of a preexisting condition. No one in America should go broke because they got sick. That's a basic principle that we seek to uphold.

Now, as you know, there's been a little controversy about who exactly will be covered under reform, and I want to be clear: If someone's here illegally, they won't be covered under this plan. That's a commitment I've made. But I also want to make this clear: Even though I do not believe we can extend coverage to those who are here illegally, I also don't simply believe we can ignore the fact that our immigration system is broken. That's why I strongly support making sure folks who are here legally have access to affordable, quality health insurance under this plan, just like everybody else. And we certainly should not let this debate on health care, one that's so essential to Hispanic Americans and all Americans, get sidetracked by those looking to exploit divisions and kill reform at any cost. That's what they always try to do.

If anything, this debate underscores the necessity of passing comprehensive immigration reform and resolving the issue of 12 million undocumented people living and working in this country, once and for all. That's what I've said from the start. That's what I say tonight.

I've asked Secretary Janet Napolitano to lead the conversation with stakeholders both on and off Capitol Hill. And I know that she's met with many of you. This is a tough issue—we all know that—which is why it's so important that we develop the strategy and the policy that's going to get us over the finish line. My commitment is real, and so is my desire to get this done. In fact, the changes we've made administratively are already making a difference. The American people did not send us to Washington to ignore problems just because they're tough. They sent us here to solve them, and that's what we can and must do on immigration reform.

On all these issues, you understand what's at stake because you see it; you experience it in your communities every single day. Whether it's health insurance reform or immigration reform, fixing our schools or reviving our economy, it is essential that we put aside the petty and the partisan, that we don't fall prey to arguments that would divide us, that would suggest that progress in America is a zero-sum game. We know the opposite is the truth. We know that here in America, we only prosper as one nation, as one people. We know that here in America, we rise or fall together. *Todos somos Americanos*.

We are called to rise above the politics of the moment to meet the challenges of our time. That's why I'm here. That's why the Congressional Hispanic Caucus is here. That's why all of you are here. Because I know and you know that this new generation of Hispanic leaders—the focus of this gathering and this organization—all of you know you haven't worked so hard and come so far just to watch history. You came here to make history. Together, that's what we can do. Together, that's what we must do. That's what we're already beginning to do.

I am absolutely confident that if all of us work together, if all of us support the extraordinary efforts of the members of the Congressional Hispanic Caucus, if you support the efforts of this administration to finally fix our immigration system and put our kids into college and make sure that folks can stay in their homes and that job opportunities exist for everybody and not just some, if we can lift the tone of the debate so that we're not scoring political points just by turning on each other, but we're instead scoring points for all of America by solving problems, if that's our attitude, nothing can stop us. Think about how far we have come. But we have so much more to do. We have so much more—such a longer road to travel. It's going to be up to all of you. And I am grateful for the opportunity to be your partner in this extraordinary journey.

Thank you very much, everybody. God bless you, and God bless the United States of America. Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 8:09 p.m. at the Walter E. Washington Convention Center. In his remarks, he referred to entertainer Marc Anthony and his wife, Jennifer Lopez; and Secretary of Homeland Security Janet A. Napolitano. The transcript was released by the Office of the Press

Secretary on September 17. The Office of the Press Secretary also released a Spanish language transcript of these remarks.

Categories: Addresses and Remarks : Congress :: Congressional Hispanic Caucus Institute award gala.

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Names: Anthony, Marc; Lopez, Jennifer; Menendez, Robert ; Napolitano, Janet ; Obama, Michelle; Pelosi, Nancy; Princess Cristina; Salazar, Kenneth L.; Solis, Hilda L.; Sotomayor, Sonia ; Velazquez, Nydia.

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